



CONTEXTS AND CONDITIONS FOR COMMUNICATION: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF MODELS

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ABSTRACT

This critical review is a step forward to investigate the role of social contexts and conditions to achieve the abilities of communication skill. Social context is believed to be able to influence attitude and motivation; provides learning opportunities, which finally turns into learner's outcome. In fact, learners acquire a language by using it in social interaction with speakers of that language. Nonetheless, significance of social context is mostly ignored or underestimated in producing communication skill and this is naturally missing. This conceptual paper starts with theoretical underpinning (Socio-cultural theory) of contexts and conditions regarding communication; goes on with reviewing four popular models of Mackey (1970), Bialystok (1978), Spolsky (1989) and Stern (1991) in relation to contexts and conditions of communication. Further, it shows the ways to achieve the mechanisms of communication skills in with special reference to FL. Eventually; the review ends up with suggestions at individual and policy level to create the environment of social contexts and conditions for achieving communication skills in Ethiopia.

KEYWORDS: Social context, social condition, FL communication, learning opportunities, learning outcomes, motivation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social context is an integral process in language learning based on Vygotskian socio-cultural theory which claims that human cognition is formed through social activity (Lantolf & Johnson 2007; Cheon 2008). In other words, learners acquire a language by using it in social interaction with speakers of that language. Learning is rooted in the learner's participation in social practice and continuous adaptation to the unfolding circumstances and activities that constitute talk-in-interaction. Moreover, social context is not simply a background variable affecting the learning, but also an essential part of cognitive development itself (Mondada and Doehler, 2004). Similarly, Jacknic (2008) argues that context of learning influences learning processes profoundly; therefore, accepting the occurrence of learning without context is not adequate because the context shapes cognitive development that is, learning. Language is principally a social mechanism. This is why languages are learned in social contexts. Although language learning is an individual process, it certainly occurs in society. For this reason, learning is significantly affected by the social factors indirectly. Hence, it is crucial to deem on these effects and center on the ways which can help us enhance contexts and conditions where learning of the foreign language occurs.

2. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

Socio-cultural theory clarifies that the development of higher-order processes of learning are rooted in experience in the socially situated context that is present in all human activities (Hawkins 2008). Socio-cultural theory is considered as the affective aspect of communicative process. It is the intersection of culture and affects (Brown 2007). By learning another language besides L1, personal and transactional barriers will be presented by two cultures in contact. In this case, socio-cultural theory endeavors to determine how the learners overcome these barriers. Moreover, it attempts to clarify the relationships exist between culture learning and foreign language learning. Learner's engagement with their social and linguistic environments needs to be accentuated because the target language interaction cannot be viewed simply as a source of input for autonomous and internal learning mechanisms according to socio-cultural disciplines (Mitchell & Myles 2004). In socio-cultural perspectives, the role of the interpersonal and interactive environment is definitely emphasized in learning the foreign language (Cheon 2008). Hence, it is essential to create an interactive learning environment in which learners can associate with each other and construct their L2 performance collaboratively through peer assistance (Cheon 2008).

3. PROMINENT MODELS

The seventies can be recognized as a period in which serious and sustained attempts were made by several psycholinguists and applied linguists to study varied approaches in order to advance our knowledge of the psychology of the language learner and of language learning. This interest in the psychology of second language learning has continued till now. The following four models provide a framework or map of factors influencing FL learning. These models are helpful to our enquiry because they identify factors or variables believed to be essential, and they suggest ways in which the sets of different variables are likely to interact.

3.1 Mackey's Model (1970)

Mackey (1970) shows the intricate varieties that may occur when we relate the language of the school to the home, area, or nation. Mackey identifies nine differ-

ent ways of arranging the language curriculum in school leading to no less than ninety different patterns of interaction between home, school, area, and nation. The details of the scheme need not concern us here, but if we apply Mackey's categories to language teaching in general, it shows in simple and clear terms how different social variables interact with language teaching and learning (Stern 1991).

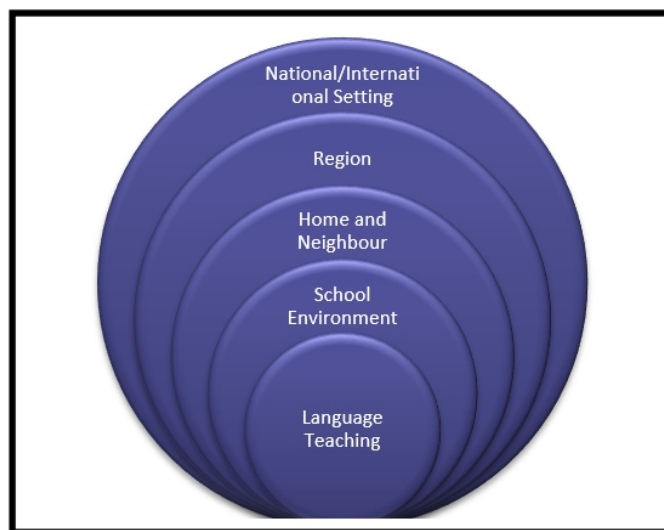


Figure1: Conceived from Mackey's Model (1970)

The above figure reflects that FL learning process is not restricted within the four walls of schools/ institutions where both learners and teachers are engaged in teaching taught activities. But it is the processes that proceeds and operates further ahead in the family, surrounding neighbor, outskirts regions, throughout the country and even at global level. With the absence of the factors other than school environment, FL learning seems to be hampered. Hence, for Mackey, setting or surrounding was the breeding factor leading to other factors in foreign language learning.

3.2 Bialystok's Model (1978)

Bialystok (1978) in his model incorporated aspects of Krashenian monitor hypothesis, and made the distinction between formal and communicative strategies, as well as the distinction between explicit and implicit ways of learning. The Bialystok model has the merit that it is designed to allow for all language output, comprehension as well as production, and it relates to learning in a formal (classroom) as well as to an informal or natural setting. This model is on three levels, labeled as input, knowledge, and output. At the input level we are outside the learner and take note of the conditions of learning: language exposure or classroom. At the knowledge level we are, so to speak, inside the 'black box' where Bialystok postulates three stores: the first, 'other knowledge', consists of the learner's first language and all the information he has gathered about languages

and the world in general. The second and the third store are those that contain the target language knowledge. Some of this knowledge which is consciously held consists of grammar rules, vocabulary knowledge, and so on: the 'explicit second language knowledge store'. The 'implicit knowledge store' contains intuitively known items in the new language. The system comes into action through processes which activate all three knowledge stores. A small number of strategies which the learner may or may not employ link the input, knowledge, and output levels with one another. The output is of two types: functional and formal. Type I is immediate and spontaneous, for communicative practice, monitoring, and inference. The type 1 output for example is, talking to people or listening to a radio broadcast. The Type II output is slower and more deliberate, for example, doing a written classroom exercise with an emphasis on rules, a written test, or reading a text-all tasks which make it possible to go over one's performance and check and correct it. It is in Type II output that the Monitor can come into play (Stern 1991).

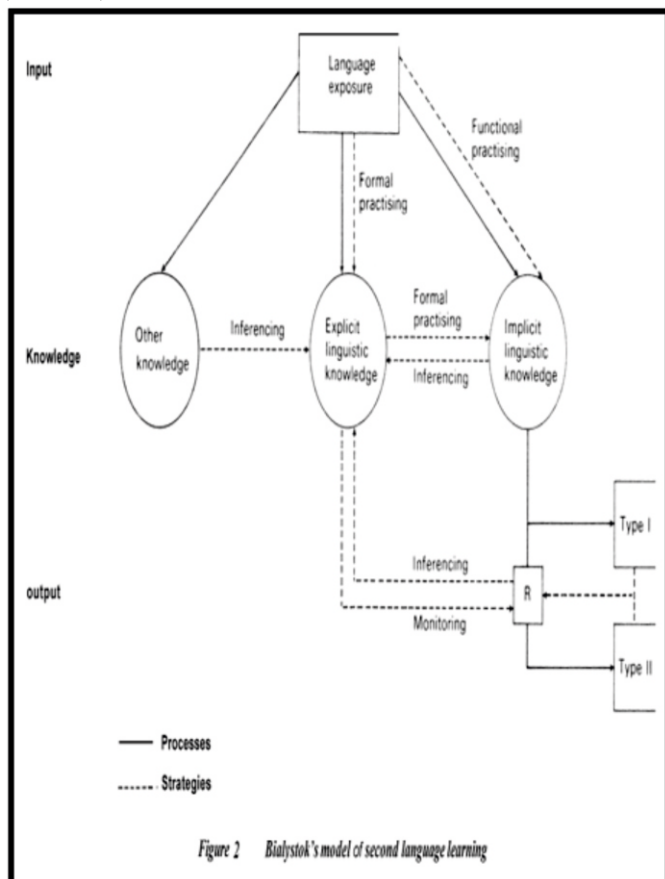


Figure 2 Bialystok's model of second language learning

The point of departure of Bialystok (1978) was where the Mackey (1972) had stopped, that was setting / surrounding. The gist of Bialystok's argument was that language is learned through the combination of process and strategy of both teachers and taught following three levels. It begins with **input** (setting, target language exposure, classrooms etc.), goes on with knowledge box compilation (previously stored, explicitly stored like grammar/vocabulary and implicitly stored), and finally ends up at **output** (formal and functional) which depends on Krashenian monitor hypothesis: sufficient time, rule practice and continual corrections. Hence, Bialystok (1978) supplemented the following FL learning contexts and conditions as under:

- Setting
- Target Language Exposure
- Classroom conditions
- Previous knowledge of learner
- Capability of learner
- Vocabulary stock
- Grammatical Competence
- Sufficient time
- Opportunity to be corrected

3.3 Spolsky's Model (1989)

3.3.1 Social Conditions

Social conditions bring about vital implications for foreign language learning particularly regarding the learning opportunities. Spolsky (1989) studied at length as to how social conditions affect FL learning and teaching and delineated as under:

- **The number of speakers** which stipulates that the number of people who speak a language as a first or second language influences the desire of others to learn it?

- **The language distance condition** claiming that the closer two languages are to each other genetically and typologically, the quicker a speaker of one will learn the other. This condition deals with the relationship between several languages in the community. If this relationship is closer, the learning time of speakers will be shorter.
- **The standard language condition** which says that "formal teaching situations are possible only with standardized languages". Standardization refers to the existence of a set of norms for correct use of the variety and a standardized writing system for the variety.
- **The vitality condition** which argues that "Informal learning situations are possible only with languages with vitality". Vitality deals with the existence of a community of people speaking the variety who have acquired it as their first language.
- **The official use condition** highlighting that people prefers to teach or learn a language which is officially used or recognized.
- **The modernized language condition** claims that people prefer to teach or learn a language which has been modernized.
- **The great tradition condition** says that people prefer to teach or learn a language which has a desirable great tradition, may be for instance a religion associated with it.
- **The social and political status** of a language in a society is important in determining goals and opportunities for learning a particular language.
- **The people's attitudes** towards the target language and its speakers also influence the learning condition.
- **The exposure condition** which claims that the more time spent learning any aspect of an FL, the more will be learned. It is the fact that the outcome of language learning largely depends on the amount and kind of exposure to the target language.
- **The instrumental condition**, which highlights that if you need to speak to someone who does not know your language, you can learn that person's language or help that person to learn your language.
- The natural learning condition is communication condition saying that the language is being used for communication which provides a necessary kind of practice for the learner because he has to make use of his language for communicating successfully.
- **The fluent speaker condition** which expresses that many speakers in the environment are fluent and native through which the learner encounters a variety of forms and styles to match his own knowledge.
- **The uncontrolled language condition** affirms that the language is normal and uncontrolled. As mentioned earlier, a learner encounters a variety of forms and natural styles which are normal and not bookish.
- **The comprehensible Input condition** saying that the learner is expected to understand the comprehensible input; therefore, the speaker makes an effort to see that language is comprehensible.
- **The learning goal condition** claiming that the language is being used so that it can be learned. Since the goal is learning, the tasks are divided into smaller chunks for the learner to understand more easily which will give more time for memory and adequate practice.
- **The teacher model condition** highlights that only one speaker (the teacher) is fluent and the majority in the environment (classroom) are not. The results are the learner's having time to adapt to one style at a time and lack of competition from other speakers better than the learners who have many models at hand and difficult to follow even one.
- **The classroom condition** maintaining that the learning takes place in a closed physical space, a single classroom. It is believed that controlled acoustics affecting hearing and comfortable physical surroundings for a better concentration can positively influence learning.
- **The simplified language condition** set to express that the language is simplified and controlled. Consequently, the teacher can make sure that the used language is within the capability of the learner.
- **The drill Input condition** in which the learner is given ample practice to develop automatic control. Without practice, learning looks uneven; with it, there is systematic development of fluency and accuracy.

3.3.2 Social contexts

Learning occurs through social interaction with others within specific contexts and communities (Fagan 2008). Social factors influence the achievement, and students in a classroom learn in a social situation affected by social influences from outside the classroom. Social context is crucial in development of attitudes towards the target language, its speakers, and the language learning situation. Consequently, motivation develops. Learning opportunities are also determined by the social context. In line with this, students are believed to be social beings participating in structured social networks. The social context and its relation with learners or social being are highlighted in this perspective. It is in this social context that the learner's language is occurring. It also provides the structuring of the learning opportunities mentioned above (Mitchell & Myles 2004). Similarly, Lantolf and Johnson (2007) assert that the argument is not that social activity influences cognition, but that social activity is the process through which human cognition is formed.

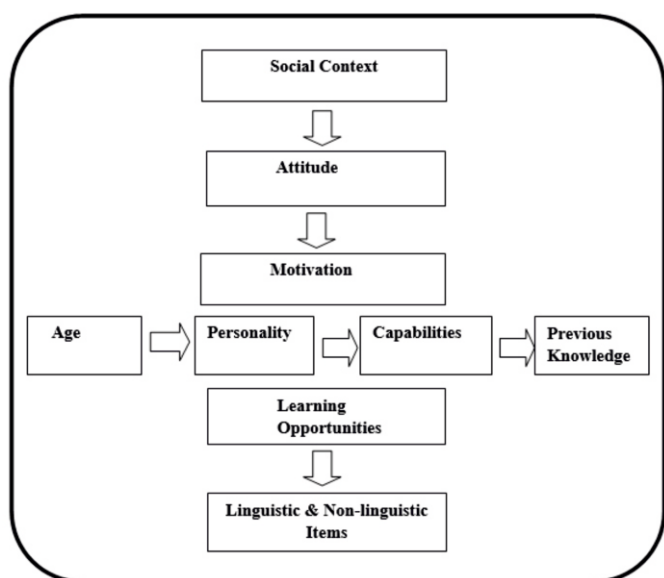


Figure 3: Conceived from Spolsky's Model (1989)

This relationship between the individual learner and the social context of learning is considered as dynamic, reflexive and constantly changing. Such relationship was traditionally controlled by the fixed learner characteristics (Mitchell & Myles 2004). Yet, motivation, anxiety, etc are considered to be continuously changing in the course of second language experience and available interaction given that language learning is a collaborative matter and the knowledge is constructed socially at first place through the interaction. Subsequently, a learner's second language learning can be definitely affected all through the contact and exposure to the social context (Spolsky 1989).

3.3.3 Attitude

It seems clear that second language learning benefits from positive attitudes and that negative attitudes may lead to decreased motivation and to unsuccessful attainment of proficiency (Brown 2007). According to social psychologists, attitudes of the learner towards the target language, its speakers and the learning context play an important role in succeeding or failing to learn a language. Similarly, Krashen highlights that those with attitudes more conducive to second language acquisition will not only seek and obtain more input, they will also have lower filter. They will be more open to the input, and it will strike deeper (Mitchell & Myles 2004). According to Gardner (1985), attitudes are of two kinds: attitudes to the people who speak the target language and attitudes to the practical use to which the learner assumes he can learn. Attitudes do not have direct influence on learning, but they lead to motivation which does (Spolsky 1989). By specifying a typical and graded condition, Spolsky (1989) asserts that a learner's attitudes affect the development of motivation. It is derivable from social context, and motivation is expressed in the learner's strategies in a specific learning situation. Thus, favorable attitudes to speakers of a language, its culture, and its country lead to integrativeness and favorable attitudes to school, to a language as a school subject, and to the person who teaches it, lead to positive motivation. The attitudinal factor then interacts with the learner's personal abilities to determine the use of available opportunities for language learning.

3.3.4 Motivation

Motivation is a significant affective variable and each person is motivated differently and acts uniquely in their environment. But these unique acts are conducted within a cultural and social milieu and cannot be completely separated from that context (Brown 2007). Countless studies and experiments have demonstrated that motivation is a key in second language learning. Among different behavioral, cognitive and constructivist perspectives on motivation, the last one gives further emphasis on social context as well as individual personal choices. The more motivation a learner has, the more time he or she will spend learning an

aspect of an FL (Spolsky, 1989). Motivation in the present context refers to the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning and plus favorable attitudes towards learning the language (Gardner 1985). Carroll (1962) suggested that the critical factors are aptitude, opportunity or method, and motivation, the latter predicting the amount of time a learner would apply to the task of language learning. Carroll's formula may be re-written as a set of graded conditions: The original simple formula suggested this by considering linguistic outcome as the result of summing ability, motivation, and opportunity: the more of any one that is present, the less the others are needed. Such motivation which makes a learner spend more time learning an aspect of second language will determine the amount and level of input he encounters which will in turn determine his progress. The frequency of forms in the speech exposed to the learner can affect the language he produces.

Two types of motivation are labeled **instrumental and integrative** according to Gardner and Lambert's original work on attitudes and motivation. The instrumental side of the dichotomy refers to acquiring a language as a means of attaining instrumental goals (Brown 2007). The integrative side describes learners who desire to integrate themselves into the culture of L2 group and involve in social interchange in that group. Many studies have been carried out to demonstrate which type of motivation works better in L2. However, it is believed that both integrative and instrumental orientations are important factors in successful L2 learning. The degree of impact of either of orientation will depend on individual learners, educational contexts, cultural milieu, teaching methodology, and social interaction (Brown 2007).

3.3.5 Age variable

After reviewing the historicity, theoretical debate and empirical studies Stern (1991) has concluded the following regarding optimal age of FL learning:

- A. Language learning may occur at different maturity levels from the early years into adult life. No age or stage stands out as optimal or critical for all aspects of second language learning.
- B. In some respects, all age levels face second language learning in similar ways; consequently adults and children are likely to have certain strategies in common and to go through similar stages of language learning. These stages have much in common with first language acquisition.
- C. Language learning like proficiency is not monolithic. There are age differences in the acquisition of different aspects of language -- phonology, vocabulary, syntax, etc.
- D. In certain respects pre-school children, young school children, older child learners, adolescents, and adults differ psychologically in their approach to second language learning. What these differences in developmental stages are is at present not fully understood. But it appears that young children respond more readily and intuitively to language 'acquisition' in social and communicative situations, while older learners can learn languages more readily by means of cognitive and academic approaches.
- E. Each stage of development may have certain advantages and certain disadvantages for second language learning.
- F. It is by observation, experiment, and by educational trial-and-error and careful evaluation of such experiments at different age levels that the particular characteristics of different age levels of language learning will gradually be revealed.
- G. For decisions on the best age for language learning a strictly developmental balance sheet, based on psychological studies, cannot be the only consideration. On educational, political, and philosophical grounds it may be desirable to introduce younger children to second languages even though it is not necessarily psychologically optimal.

A guiding principle arrived at after a review of much of the available evidence (Stern 1991) has been 'to recognize that a language can be taught from any age upwards. Once this has been accepted, the decision at what stage in the educational process to introduce a foreign language can be governed by three criteria: (a) the estimated time necessary to reach a desired level of language proficiency by a specified stage in the school career of the majority of learners; (b) the educational value attributed to learning foreign languages at a given stage of the curriculum; and (c) the human and material resources required to develop and maintain an educationally sound and successful foreign language programme.'

3.3.6 Personality variable

Language learning requires certain qualities of personality traits like high level of aspiration, goal orientation, perseverance, positive task orientation, ego involvement and need achievement. There are certain personality characteristics which are helpful or detrimental to successful language learning.

- A. It is observed that outgoing students with histrionic talents are more successful language learners than more inhibited or introverted students (Stern 1991).

- B. The willingness and the refusal to learn a language is also important in learning language (Ibid 1991).
- C. The 'anomic' individual, because of his critical attitude to his own society, is open to the demands of a different language and culture; therefore anomie is a positive predictor of language achievement. In other words, learning a new language demands flexibility and openness to new language norms and norms of social behavior (Gardner 1972).
- D. Good language learners are not necessarily those to whom a language comes very easily; but they have perseverance, have overcome frustrations, and have, after many trials and errors, achieved a satisfactory level of achievement (Naiman et al. 1978).
- E. The pupil who are more empathetic (the willingness and capacity to identify with others)-which has been used in clinical and personality psychology has been applied to the have more ability to identify the communicative behaviour of users of the target language (ibid. 1978).
- F. Larson and Smalley (1972) have emphasized that those learners who handle the trauma of 'culture shock' (state of anxiety to which the learner is exposed upon entering a new and totally unfamiliar culture) and 'culture stresses' (the more prolonged discomfort resulting from discrepancies between the self-image and the expectations of the new culture), are better language learners.
- G. The mature and mentally healthy individual who is detached, self-critical, and has a sense of humour, can cope with this demand of language learning better than a rigid or status-conscious individual who lacks self-awareness or humour and who suffers a sense of deprivation in the early stages of second language learning (Stern 1991).
- H. Tolerance of ambiguity' has also been considered a useful characteristic of a good language learner. The learner who is capable of accepting with tolerance and patience the frustrations of ambiguity that second language learning inevitably involves is emotionally in a better position to cope with them in a problem-solving frame of mind than a student who feels frustrated or angry in ambiguous situations.

3.3.7 Capability variable

Each individual has different capabilities and cognition level. The learners who have better word knowledge, verbal intelligence, reasoning, and school achievement are better in language learning too. According to another study, three different capabilities are very important in different levels of language learning -- the ability to cope with a sound system and its written representation, the ability to absorb its grammatical rule system, and verbal memory skills

3.3.8 Previous knowledge

Age and previous knowledge are two sides of a coin. An FL learner with previous knowledge accelerates faster than others. He has more possibilities of language use, task completion, situationalizations and content deliveries.

3.3.9 Formal/informal opportunities

The society provides formal and informal learning opportunities to the learner of a foreign language. Formal or classroom learning occurs in a situation where only the teacher has the dominance and controls the exposure which leads to learning. The language in this type of learning is used only to teach and meaningless drills are the focus. Instead of encountering fluent speakers, only the teacher is fluent whose language is controlled and simplified. The context here is the closed four walls of the classroom rather than a real milieu. If a learner gets good school and teacher of FL, there are strong chances of excellent FL learning and vice-versa.

The Informal situations are available in different kinds and amount according to social conditions which determine the potential opportunities for a learner to interact with speakers and writers of the target language. Informal learning is also called natural language learning in which the individual picks up a second language in the environment where it is used. Such learning occurs through communicating with the others as the central purpose since the language is used for communication in informal learning. The learner encounters fluent speakers of the target language whose language used is free and normal, and the context is the real outside world. Therefore, the better avenues of informal confrontation of FL greater are the chances of FL learning.

3.3.10 Linguistic/Non-linguistic Items

The interplay between language learner and learning opportunity determines the learner's success in achieving the linguistic outcomes such as linguistic and communicative competence of a variable nature and non-linguistic outcomes. Linguistic items include underlying knowledge or skills, analyzed or unanalyzed, implicit or explicit, functional skills or as overall proficiency, productive or receptive, with a specified degree of accuracy, with a specified degree of fluency and with a specified approximation to native speaker usage of one or more specified varieties of language. Non-linguistic outcomes include changes of attitude and satisfaction or frustration of personal learning goals that have been determined personally or socially.

Spolsky's (1989) twenty conditions and ten variables in his model, strongly advocated that foreign language learning takes place in a social context. This social context shapes learning in two ways. Primarily, the social context leads to learner's attitudes towards both the target language community and the learning situation. This leads to the development of motivation in learners. This motivation joins with personal characteristics (age, personality, capability and previous knowledge) which all together justify the use a learner makes of accessible learning opportunities. The interaction between learner and learning opportunities determines the outcomes for the learner (Spolsky 1989). Hence, his attempt from his predecessors was remarkable. He added five important variables that were not explained before:

- Social context
- Attitude
- Motivation
- Age and
- Personality

3.4. Stern's Model (1991)

Stern (1991) identified five sets of variables affecting language learning. Three of these -- (i) social context, (ii) learner characteristics, and (iii) learning conditions- are represented as determiners of (iv) the learning process and, through it, of (v) the learning outcome.

Stern (1991) seems to be very conclusive and simple in drawing the outline of his model. He grouped all previous proposed variables into four categories -- learners' characteristics, social contexts, learning conditions, and learners' outcome. To him, it is process and not final product that matters for foreign language learning. Although he did not propose any new variable but his simplification and categorization is important input of his model.

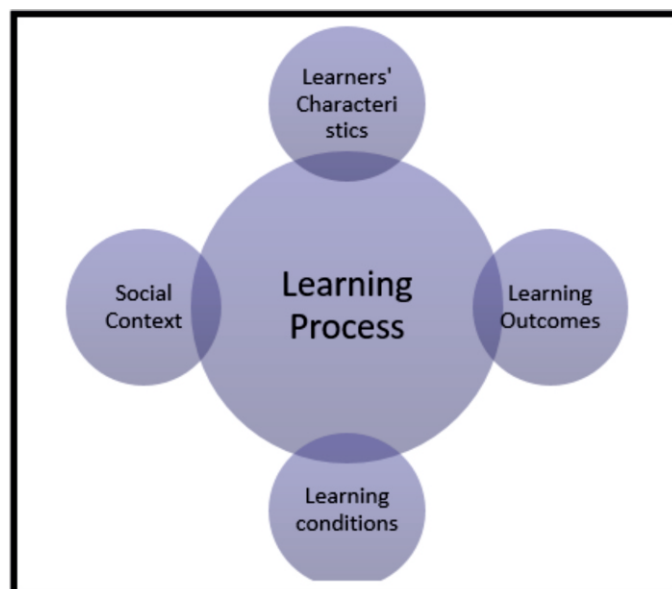


Figure 4: Conceived from Stern's Model (1991)

Apart from the variables mentioned in four different models there are other factors also that influence the teaching and learning FL. In my personal experience, I found some variables which certainly influence learning and teaching FL. Also, they mirror here and there in the literature but needs to be systematically studied. They may be summarized as under:

- Teacher's Attitude
- Parent's Support
- Out-of-school Exposure
- Linguistic Self-confidence
- Curriculum

4. CONCLUSION

In sum, learner factors are not yet well understood in spite of plethora of theoretical and empirical studies. My selective review of some of these factors has shown that there has been in recent years an increasing awareness of specific psychological characteristics which have bearing on approaches to language learning and which can ultimately influence the learning outcome. In a cautious way we can 'attempt to adapt educational treatment to the diagnosis of individual differences, provided we resist the temptation of stereotyping learners for selection or teaching purposes. Our knowledge of learning styles or personality factors is simply neither comprehensive nor refined enough nor sufficiently secure to base clear-cut administrative decisions on it. Nevertheless, the awareness of learner characteristics and individual differences among language learners can sensitize teachers to possible variations in learner reactions to teaching and to differences in learning strategies. The concepts of learner characteristics should

therefore have a place in our language teaching theory and both cognitive and affective factors should be included. Educational background, previous language learning experience, as well as the components of aptitude assessments and learning styles can provide an indication of the way in which the learner is likely to respond to the cognitive demands of the more academic side of language learning. An analysis of affective and personality characteristics can indicate how the individual is likely to respond to emotional, motivational, and interpersonal demands of language learning. To sum up, based on the review of socio-cultural theory and four models, it is crystal-clear that in EFL contexts, we need to provide and prepare more opportunities and chances so as to help learners learn the L2 more efficiently and practically.

5. RECOMMENDATION

From the review of the factors of language learning we can derive four basic sets of strategies which a good learner is likely to employ while less efficient learners employ them weakly or fail to maintain them altogether.

- A. A good FL learner selects goals and sub-goals, and actively participates in the learning process.
- B. A good language learner has an 'academic' (explicit) learning strategy. She analyzes the language and develops the necessary techniques of practice and memorization. She monitors her performance and revises it in order to progress towards an improved foreign language command. She excludes the first language more and more till the required competence is achieved. She is capable of treating the language as knowledge and as a skill to be acquired.
- C. A good language learner is likely to employ the social learning strategy. She recognizes the inevitably dependent status in early learning and accepts the infantilization involved. She seeks a communicative contact with target language users and the target language community. In spite of her limitations, a good learner will tend to develop and use 'communication strategies' and techniques of coping with difficulties in communicating in an imperfectly known second language. She actively participates in authentic language use.
- D. A good language learner copes effectively with the emotional problems (language stress and language shock) of language learning. She approaches the task in a positive frame of mind, develop the necessary energy to overcome frustrations, and persist in her efforts.

Emphasizing over the importance of social contexts Spolsky (1989) has suggested the following remarks to develop social contexts at policy level:

- A. There is a need to change the viewpoint regarding FL under target.
- B. Educational system should be built around the FL to be progressed.
- C. Tourism sector should be promoted as it provides maximum informal learning opportunities in targeted FL for people.
- D. Media should be used as a springboard for the FL under target.
- E. Economic reforms (MNCs and Open market system) should be encouraged to create the atmosphere of FL under consideration.

Hence, there is a great need to empirically study the factors of EFL learning in Ethiopia. Each model discussed above is developed by the scholars in their respective countries which may not be fit into Ethiopian context and conditions. Each and every variable has to be studied in detail and an Ethiopian model may be developed through logistic regression which is a technique to build models. Of course, it needs expertise, financial back-up and rigorous work-out. Model is successful unless it is fit to the contexts and conditions where it has to be applied. Most of the western models are facing misfit in developing nations; therefore, need of the hour is to test those scholarly proposed variables on empirical ground situations to best fit the Ethiopian model of FL learning.

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